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Widespread heavy snow and icy conditions, 17–23 December 2009

23 December 2009

Background

From around mid-December, cold air from eastern Europe dominated the UK weather. This was to be the start of a cold spell which would continue up to the start of the Christmas period.

Widespread frost, ice and snow affected some areas.

- The first significant snowfall occurred on the night of Thursday 17 December and into Friday 18 December.
- Parts of south-east England, Yorkshire and north-east England were badly affected, with particularly deep snow in parts of East Anglia.

By the weekend of 19/20 December the cold air had spread across much of the North Atlantic, effectively surrounding the UK.

- On Sunday 20 December heavy snow from the north-west affected western areas of Scotland, northern England, and Northern Ireland.
- On Monday 21 December heavy snow affected southern areas of England during the late afternoon and evening, as milder air from the south mixed with the cold air already across the UK. Snow was particularly heavy during the evening rush hour in parts of Hampshire.
- On Tuesday 22 December eastern areas of Scotland had frequent snow showers.

By Tuesday night less-cold conditions began to move into parts of south-west England. However, the wintry problems were far from over as rain fell onto frozen road surfaces leading to ice on many routes in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.

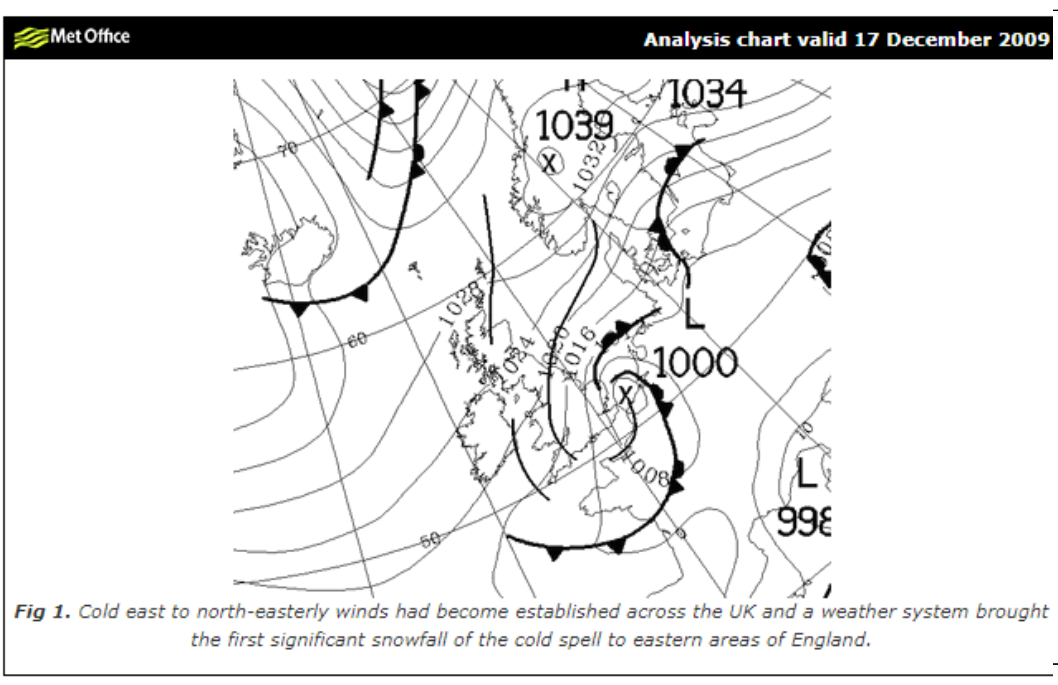

Fig 1. Cold east to north-easterly winds had become established across the UK and a weather system brought the first significant snowfall of the cold spell to eastern areas of England.

Weather data

Many places had a few centimetres of snow and the table below lists the top- five snow depths for the period.

Top-five snow depths in centimetres (provisional figures)			
Location	**Depth (cm)**	**Location**	**Depth (cm)**
0900, Friday 18 December		**0900, Monday 21 December**	
Copley, Durham	16	Aviemore, Highland	20
Wattisham, Suffolk	12	Copley, Durham	17
Buntingford, Hertfordshire	12	Aberfeldy, Perth and Kinross	15
Cambridge Botanic Garden	11	Alston, Cumbria	13
Bank Newton, North Yorks/Alston, Cumbria	9	Lough Fea, Londonderry/Marham	11
0900, Saturday 19 December		**0900, Tuesday 22 December**	
Cottesmore, Rutland	13	Aberfeldy, Perth and Kinross	17
Wittering, Cambs/Copley, Durham	12	Aviemore/Spadeadam, Cumbria	16
Cambridge Botanic Garden	11	Newton Rigg, Cumbria	15
Westgate, Durham/Marham	10	High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire	12
0900, Sunday 20 December			
Copley, Durham	17		
Cottesmore, Rutland	13		
Westgate, Durham/Marham	12		
Cambridge Botanic Garden	10		

Impacts

As the snow and ice arrived just as schools broke up for Christmas and many people started travelling for the Christmas period, travel was disrupted.

- Motorists trapped overnight (Daily Mail)
- Jet slides off runway (Sky News)

Sadly a number of people also died.

- Cornwall coach crash (Daily Telegraph)
- Six killed in the big freeze (Daily Mirror)

How we did

The start of the cold spell was well forecast via our website and media broadcasts. An advisory, issued on Tuesday 15 December, gave the first warning of snow in eastern areas of England, expected to fall on Thursday and Friday of that week.

An early warning on the Wednesday, followed by a flash warning on the Thursday evening, was issued for London and parts of south-east England.

On Thursday 17 December we issued an advisory for heavy snow across Northern Ireland, western areas of Scotland, North Wales, and north-west England forecast for Sunday 20 December.

By Friday, the advisory for Northern Ireland was updated to an early warning of snow for the area on Sunday.

On the afternoon of Monday 21 December we issued flash warnings for heavy snow across southern areas of England during the evening and night.

In addition, numerous flash warnings were issued during the period to warn of icy roads and other less heavy falls of snow. The Met Office Public Weather Service Advisors remain in regular contact with the emergency services and emergency planners to ensure that everyone has been fully briefed on the situation.

The Press Office has been advising the UK and international media on the weather conditions and updated forecasts.

“The Met Office had predicted when the snow was coming.”

AA president Edmund King